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Exile and its metaphors: a reading of Katherine Mansfield's "Je ne parle pas français"

Pamela Dunbar

1 Katherine Mansfield spent all her adult life in exile, and the subject of exile in the modern world informs most of the stories--including those set in her home country New Zealand. However, the confessional tale 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français' (written 1918) is exceptional[1] in the explicitness with which it transforms exile into a metaphorical condition representing--and to some degree anticipating--the perceived alienations of the Modernist self.

2 The story is set in Paris--the Paris of seedy apartments and cheap cafés. It opens with its narrator, a would-be poet Raoul Duquette, reflecting both on his own personality and on his friendship with a young Englishman, Dick Harmon--in particular the sense of desertion and humiliation he felt when Dick left to return to England. However, Dick turns up again later this time accompanied by his lover, a young woman referred to only as Mouse. Shortly afterwards Dick abandons her in order--or so we are told--to return to his mother. Raoul, perversely elated at the couple's suffering, also stands Mouse up.

3 Early in the narrative Raoul attempts a nineteenth-century novelist's thumbnail sketch of himself :

> My name is Raoul Duquette. I am twenty-six years old and a Parisian, a true Parisian. About my family--it really doesn't matter. I have no family; I don't want any. I never think about my childhood. I've forgotten it. [p. 66][2]

4 But the attempt collapses under the weight of his repressions.

5 What also collapses, and the point is important to the way the tale sets out its alternative conception of the self, is the convention of the thumbnail sketch--together with its neo-humanist assumption that human lives, if not actually heroic, at least develop organically, and have both coherence and significance :

> Individual development is regarded [by the nineteenth-century novelist] as of general human importance, and considered logical in form: laws of psychological cause and effect, of interaction between character and circumstantial environment, are in operation.[3]

6 Shortly afterwards Raoul has another try at a brief biography, this time erasing any reference to his childhood :

> I date myself from the moment that I became tenant of a small bachelor flat on the fifth floor of a tall, not too shabby house, in a street that might or might not be discreet. Very useful, that.... There I emerged, came out into the light and put out my two horns with a study and a bedroom and a kitchen on my back. [p.67]

7 But between these failed attempts to construct through denial his own identity Raoul lets slip a reference to a childhood adventure that was instrumental in the formation of his identity :

> When I was about ten our laundress was an African woman, very big, very dark, with... frizzy hair... She took me into a little outhouse, caught me up in her arms and began kissing me. Ah, those kisses! Especially those kisses inside my ears that nearly deafened me.
> *And then with a soft growl she tore open her bodice and put me to her.* When she set me down she took from her pocket a little round fried cake covered with sugar and I reeled along the passage back to our door.[4]

8 It is this seduction, which takes place once a week throughout the narrator's childhood, that leads to the corrupting of his character--chiefly by encouraging him to connect sexual adventure with reward. The relationship also lays the ground for the adult Raoul's shiftiness, his reputed occupations of gigolo and sexual procurer, and his readiness to humiliate women. So, in place of the nineteenth-century novel's assumptions about the hero's personal probity and the coherent development or his character, we have sleaze... and the beginnings of the Freudian doctrine of repression and return[5].

9 As well as subverting long-established conventions 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français' signals its adherence to more contemporary models for the personality. The closest of these models to Mansfield's tale--and one which may well have influenced it--is that offered by the narrator of Dostoevsky's confessional novella *Notes from Underground*. Mansfield may well have come across this while she and her lover (later husband) John Middleton Murry were staying at Bandol in southern France in 1915, and he was preparing his book on Dostoevsky[6].

10 Both Dostoevsky's hero and Mansfield's are modern-age city-dwellers; nervily introspective and keeping themselves apart from the crowds. Both are also bound into the psychology of humiliation and revenge. And both in offering their 'confessions' mock as just another delusion the kind of ostentatious 'truth-telling' Rousseau engages in in his *Confessions.*

11 The clearest evidence for direct influence lies in the way Mansfield takes over Dostoevsky's metaphor of the 'under-ground' and applies it to her own hero, adding as she does so the explicit referent of psychological repression: when Raoul wishes to distinguish his own style from that of the touchy and pretentious Underground Man he vows to make a name for himself 'as a writer about the submerged world. [My underlining] But not as others have done before [him]. Oh, no! Very naïvely, with a sort of tender humour and from the inside, as though it were all quite simple, quite natural.' [p. 67]

12 As well as using him to subvert the nineteenth-century convention of the thumbnail sketch Mansfield also interrogates through Raoul the anti-narrative (and anti-realist) revelatory 'moment' of the Romantics, believed by them to endow their lives with moral and spiritual significance; indeed to be crucial to the formation of the subject's creative identity. The belief later becomes one of the central tenets of Modernist writing[7].

13 Raoul has his own 'grand moment' while passing the time in his favourite cafe: 'There! it had come--the moment--the geste! And although I was so ready, it caught me, it tumbled me over; I was simply overwhelmed.' [p. 64] The self-doubt which precedes this vision--as well as its unexpectedness, its brevity and its intensity--all give it the thumbprint of the Romantic and Joycean epiphany.

14 However, where the Romantic's 'moment' is charged with spiritual and artistic significance, Raoul's is the result of a distorted mindset. Mansfield makes it clear that his 'grand experience' has been triggered by that 'stupid, stale little phrase "Je ne parle pas français"' [p. 64] which he finds jotted down on a writingpad in the cafe, and which is associated for him with the young Englishwoman Mouse. She, alone in a foreign capital and deserted by her boyfriend, is as we have seen also let down by Raoul himself. This means he has got his moment of exultation from humiliating a vulnerable young woman--morally dubious and psychologically contingent conditions which have no parallel in the transcendent nature of the Romantic epiphany. It is appropriate that Raoul's 'moment' should leave him feeling a sense of agony rather than any inspiration.

15 Not only the visionary 'moment' but also the Romantic image of the artist gets subverted through Mansfield's narrator. Raoul's narcissism, his place as social outcast--made clear in several minor incidents--his voyeurism and readiness to exploit others, his unhealthy obsession with intense feelings: all mark him out as a parody of the Romantic artist. The titles of his works only confirm his thirdrateness--*Wrong Doors*, *False Coins*, and *Left Umbrellas*. And as well as his treatment of Mouse, Raoul's 'night jobs' of pimp and gigolo appear to reflect certain unsavoury aspects not only of his general character but also of his artistic persona.

16 In the Raoul of 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français'--as well as in the hero of the related work 'A Married Man's Story'--Mansfield offers, then, an early Modernist re-visioning of the nineteenth-century myth of the highflown artist--represented by the Romantics as inspired and idealistic, a 'prophet' for the times; and frequently imaged by them as a soaring bird. Through Raoul, who sees himself not as bird but as a fox-terrier, predatory and inquisitive and even tiresome, Mansfield makes clear that the Romantic's is a vision which cannot be realised: the artist is now a banal figure, one of debased ideals and of marginal social and cultural significance.

> Mansfield also deconstructs through Raoul another Modernist tendency which had its origins in Romantic epistemology--the conception of the self merely as the sum of the superficial sense-impressions it receives. Early on in the tale Raoul offers his own view :
>
> I don't believe in the human soul. I never have. I believe that people are like portmanteaux--packed with certain things, started going, thrown about, tossed away, dumped down, lost and found, hall emptied suddenly, or squeezed fatter than ever, until finally the Ultimate Porter swings them on to the Ultimate Train and away they rattle....
>
> Not but what these portmanteaux can be very fascinating. Oh, but very! I see myself standing in front of them, don't you know, like a Customs official.
>
> "Have you anything to declare? Any wines, spirits, cigars, perfumes, silks?"

> And the moment of hesitation as to whether I am going to be fooled just before I chalk that squiggle, and then the other moment of hesitation just after, as to whether I have been, are perhaps the two most thrilling instants in life. [pp. 60-61]

17 This--manifestly jokey--conception of the self is of course wholly arbitrary; it denies the validity either of essence or of experience, and implies that the past has no consistent part to play in the self's construction. (Raoul's denial of his own past is of course consistent with this interpretation.)

18 Such a notion, clearly absurd, is undermined in the tale itself in several ways--by Raoul's own rhetorical query, " How can one look the part and not be the part?" [p. 75] for instance; but also by references to photography, which play off the two-dimensionality of the visual image against hints of some more complex notion of identity. And we have already traced a relationship between the one incident from Raoul's childhood that he does reveal, and the formation of his personality[8].

19 During the course of Mansfield's tale both Mouse and Dick become exiles in Paris; their problems and preoccupations, those of displaced persons. But in his lack of relations with family and his rootless citydweller's lifestyle, Raoul is also an exile in a metaphoric sense--a sense that connects him closely with the alienated Modernist self: 'Exile as the essential characteristic of the modern writer anticipates the loss by the community as a whole of identity, a sense of history, a sense of home.'[9] 'Exile...has been profoundly important in creating the "unhoused" spirit of modern art.'[10] (The image of the portmanteau, which Raoul used in his attempt--quoted earlier--to anatomise his conception of human identity incidentally also suggests a rootless life.)

20 In order both to point up Raoul's signification as exile and to interrogate the old, stable, unitary conception of the self, Mansfield conflates his fictional identity with that of the tale's literal exiles Mouse and Dick. In so doing she draws on a technique and way-of-seeing used both by Dostoevsky in his great novels, and by several later English-language novelists of the Modernist school.

21 Raoul and Dick are to a large extent defined in terms of 'Frenchness' and 'Englishness': Raoul for instance makes frequent reference both to his own Frenchness and to the Englishness of Dick and Mouse. However, there is also--especially with respect to the two friends Raoul and Dick--a blurring of national associations which appears to have a larger purpose than simply suggesting an affinity on both their parts for each other's culture. Raoul for instance has an English writingtable and overcoat, and Dick's letter to Mouse, which is written in French, is perhaps 'a shade too French' [p.74]. The two are also fluent in each other's languages, and each has an interest in the other's literature. And on first seeing Dick Raoul asks who he is, then echoes the response in describing himself :

> "Who is he?"
> "An Englishman. From London. A writer. And he is making a special study of modern French literature."
> That was enough for me. My little book, *False Coins*, had just been published. I was a young, serious writer who was making a special study of modern English literature. [p. 71]

22 Just as Raoul's national identity merges with that of his friend Dick, so his sexual and gender characteristics merge with those of woman--specifically with those of Mouse[11]. His description of himself is marked by signs of femininity :

> I am little and light with an olive skin, black eyes with long lashes, black silky hair cut short, tiny square teeth that show when I smile. My hands are small and supple.

> A woman in a bread shop once said to me: "You have the hands for making fine pastries." I confess, without my clothes I am rather charming. Plump, almost like a girl, with smooth shoulders, and I wear a thin gold bracelet above my left elbow. [p. 68]

23 Mouse on the other hand is represented as boyish.

24 The connection between this particular man and woman is drawn in the tale by means of the image of a trapped butterfly--the counterpart perhaps to the Romantic's soaring bird of inspiration--which Raoul relates, first to himself--in a context of theatricality and cross-dressing which emphasises the extent to which gender is socially constructed--and then to Mouse. The image suggests victimised innocence, but also possibilities for transformation that involve a conception of human identity both more complex and more mysterious than any Raoul himself can conceive of. The reader, recalling that the classical figure of Psyche was figured as a butterfly, will also be reminded of Raoul's own claim not to believe in the soul :

> I wore a blue kimono embroidered with white birds and my hair was still wet; it lay on my forehead, wet and gleaming.
> "Portrait of Madame Butterfly," said I, "on hearing of the arrival of *ce cher Pinkerton*." [p. 74]
> Mouse was beautiful. She was exquisite, but so fragile and fine that each time I looked at her it was as if for the first time. She came upon you with the same kind of shock that you feel when you have been drinking out of a thin innocent cup and suddenly, at the bottom, you see a tiny creature, half butterfly, half woman... [p. 80]

25 Like Mouse Raoul is, or imagines himself to have been, deserted, and hence humiliated, by Dick (The Madame Butterfly image is significant here). But like Dick Raoul also humiliates Mouse--or at least imagines he has done so. His--Raoul's--identity comes close, then, to merging with those of both the literal exiles of the story[12].

26 So Mansfield, a more daring and innovative writer than has sometimes been recognised, offers in 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français'--and particularly through the character of Raoul--an early formulation of what was to become the new, Modernist self; a self later made famous by Joyce, Woolf and others; one which is always *ailleurs* and always *autre*, exiled both from its milieu and from that traditional, more noble and coherent neohumanist self which it superceded[13].

NOTES

1. 'A Married Man's Story' (1921) is similar in many respects though it does not deal with the dimension of physical displacement that figures so prominently in 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français'.

2. Except where otherwise stated page-references to 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français' refer to the Constable~Penguin edition of *The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, London 1945; reprinted 1982. This observation, and others essential to my argument, are discussed at more length in my *Radical Mansfield*, London (Macmillan) 1997.

3. Michael Hollington, 'Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time'; in *Modernism 1890--1930*, eds Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, London (Penguin) 1976, p. 431.

4. *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Antony Alpers, Auckland and Oxford 1984, p. 281. The italicised passage is one of several censored from the Constable version. The Oxford edition prints the unexpurgated tale. As well as the difference between the ages of the two parties involved, the transgressive nature of the episode is underlined in the racial identity that has been assigned to the woman: she is a black African--a representation for the young white, male European narrator, of the Other.

5. Mansfield must have known something of Freud's earlier works, which would have been a common topic for discussion in the cafe society she frequented on returning to London in 1908. And several of her friends were acquainted with Freud's writings--the editor A.R. Orage, and D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda to name only three. In any case 'Psychology' (19l9?), one of Mansfield's most intriguing stories, makes reference to the then radical process of 'psycho-analysis'--and in a context which makes it clear the author had some knowledge of what was involved.

6. Middleton Murry himself compared 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français' with *Notes From Underground*: 'my sensation is like that which I had when I read Dostoevsky's *Letter from the Underworld* .... It's utterly unlike any sensation I have ever yet had from any writing of yours, or any writing at all except Dostoevsky's.' *Between Two Worlds*, o p. cit., p. 464) Saralyn Daly, *Katherine Mansfield,* New York 1965, p p. 73-74, lists key similarities in characterisation and structure between the two works.

7. The classic example of the visionary 'moment' in Modernist literature is of course Stephen Dedalus' strandside 'epiphany' from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This was published in 1916, and may well also have influenced Mansfield in the writing of 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français'.

8. It is also worth noting that, having rejected the body--soul conception of the self, Raoul employs another baldly dualistic metaphor to encapsulate--or sell short--the complexities of the artistic process: 'All the while I wrote that last page my other self has been chasing up and down out in the dark there. It left me just when I began to analyse my grand moment, dashed off distracted, like a lost dog who thinks at last, at last, he hears the familiar step again.' (p. 65) Duality may be hinted at in Raoul's surname 'Du-quette' (my hyphen)--not a commonly recognised French name.

9. Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile*, Brighton (Harvester) 1981, p. 14.

10. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern World*, London (Penguin) 1989, p. 168.

11. In its structural organisation the tale appears to invite the reader initially to regard 'Frenchness' and 'Englishness' as being in diametric opposition--Self versus Other, Corruption versus Innocence: a sort of national and cultural polarity equivalent to the biological polarity of Male versus Female. See C. A. Hankin, *Katherine Mansfield and Her Confessional Stories*, London 1983, p p. l60-61, for a discussion of the literary connections of Raoul Duquette and Mouse.

12. Biographers, drawing partly on the writer's own comments, have indicated the parallels between the key characters of the tale and Mansfield's one-time lover the French writer Francis Carco, her husband John Middleton Murry, and the writer herself: see e.g. Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield,* Oxford 1987, p p. 272-73.

13. That Mansfield's characterisation in this tale should be so clearly inferior, and on her own chosen grounds of authenticity and verisimilitude, to that achieved in other works, may be attributed in part to her preoccupation--much more direct here than elsewhere--with conceptual considerations, and in part to a concern to render the inauthenticity of characters separated from their roots; but in part perhaps also to her desire to offer a critique of what was to become an extreme form of one aspect of Modernist literature.

ABSTRACTS

L'article traite des aspects du Moi dans le "Je Ne Parle Pas Français" de Katherine Mansfield et en particulier de son refus de la croyance, chez les romanciers du dix-neuvième siècle, en une vie stable et cohérente. Katherine Mansfield croit en un Moi moderniste dans lequel prédominent la répression, l'aliénation, la division, l'instabilité, le traumatisme, etc... L'article examine également les liens entre le décor d'exil de cette nouvelle et le déracinement.

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